

# Contemporary Challenges for Women in the Education Sector and Education Unions

## 1. **Measurements and interpretations of activism** (breaking down 'activism'/'unionist' stereotypes)

The characteristics of women's ways of working, leadership styles and skills are often undervalued by unions. Thus, union responses to the gender question have sometimes failed to hit the mark because they re-apply notions of 'under-representation' in areas the (male) union holds to be important, without valuing and building on women's activities as they exist. That is, how unions measure 'activism' and 'contributing' can portray a notion of failure or disinterest on the part of women, rather than formalising the contributions already being made.

It can be useful here, to consider the differing structural/organisational approaches the genders often use (and also gender theory), as a way to understand why in the quest for equal access to unions, some animosity and backlash can occur.

One commentator on masculinity, (Chris Mclean, 1997, p13-14) points out in a paper on engaging with boys' experience of masculinity:

*"all of the major signifiers of manhood are continually under threat or intrinsically transitory: money, political power, physical strength, sexual performance – none can be relied upon to last. 'Making a man out of a boy' means teaching him that the human sacrifices in the power struggle are essential to the process of becoming a man."*

Mclean also talks of how one of the most powerful myths of our society is that

*"everyone can be a winner if only they try hard enough, and most men who fail to make it to the top believe it is because they were not good enough, rather than because the system is inherently wrong."*

This analysis is important for understanding how union actions, worker struggle, union leadership battles are all about constant competition about 'fighting' and 'proving ones' worth', and of demonstrating your political credentials time and time again. It's often commented how for some women the language of 'activist', 'campaigns' and 'fights' is in fact, alienating. Also alienating is how much 'talk time' at union meetings, conferences, rallies etc, is taken up by men repeating each other.

However, many women don't see themselves as needing to prove themselves through their union activities, but rather simply wanting to contribute how they can. This is less about wanting recognition for their actions, (positions, titles or 'talk time') than about community building, sharing of experiences, professional development and assisting in a campaign they are passionate about.

Some of our union's most active women members do not in fact identify themselves as 'activists' at all, perhaps as Hallock suggests, because:

*"...women often 'do' their unionism differently from men... Unions in the USA successfully organise when they develop comprehensive campaigns that allow rank and file participation and focus on leadership development, and these campaigns are the most successful among women." (Hallock in Pocock 1997:65)*

When building 'women's activism' is approached in this manner, we can see how women can be the key to union revival and renewal. **So in fact, while voice and representation is important for the equal participation and decision making in a union by those marginalised by structures, the frequent use of statistics on women's representation to indicate the level of women's activism can**



## **undervalue the work of women who are actively participating in and engaging others in union debate and activities.**

Too often 'activism' seems to be something that is measured or judged by a member's level of involvement and positions held, rather than the social values that inform a member's actions and conversation, whether it be in the workplace or in their involvement with the wider community such as sporting groups, children's play groups or volunteering etc.

In the lead-up to this kit being developed, the AEU produced posters and stickers that attempted to deconstruct what a 'union activist' was and asked women to re-conceptualise their actions as indeed being a vital and active part of the work of their union.

When women:

- forward email campaigns to their friends and family;
- stick campaign stickers on their cars and work diaries;
- volunteer for a membership phone blitz or survey;
- write a letter to the editor on class sizes or skill shortages;
- articulately argue in a staff meeting why Brendan Nelson does not deserve an invite to the school speech night;

they are all engaging in and actively partaking in union work, despite their perhaps not being able to attend the sub-branch meeting due to a night class, or kids' basketball commitments, for example.

Continuing the process of validating and celebrating the many ways union members contribute to the collective must be a priority, as must increasing the numerical representation of women in decision making and public forums of the union.

And indeed much more research needs to be conducted to understand to a greater extent all the ways women are active and how they can be supported further by the union.

## **2. Inclusive recruitment and organisational strategies (getting to women where they are)**

Feminists understood from the beginning that women learn, share and develop political ideas as a result of experience. Anecdotally, unions are told how so many women end up joining their union or becoming more involved because of a bad employment experience, being encouraged by a union member, by professional issues they are passionate about that the union responds to, and also through social justice campaigns that women are already interested in.

**In all of these cases, the immediacy, the intimacy and the lower level of intimidation that can be offered by local union involvement can be the key to women becoming more comfortable to being involved and understanding union processes better.**

Various strategies to broaden the local union possibilities for members, and of bringing union activities to a less confrontational and more personal level, are proving beneficial for increased women's participation across unions.

In the coming years, the increase in the casualisation of jobs, and the level of contract part-time or permanent part-time work women undertake as their best option to balance work and family responsibilities, is resulting in women being harder and harder to 'access' in the workplace. Casual lecturers, or sessionals in TAFE, and many support staff in schools, have no desk, no phone and barely any regular contact with colleagues to hear about, let alone participate in, union activity.



Cutting through the time issues and being able to get to women 'where they are', or 'where they want to be' offers a few ideas for tackling the looming issue with involvement of these particular groups of women, but also women in general.

Excessive meeting schedules is a problem both in the union as well as workload sense, but the concern is still a legitimate one for women when they cannot regularly attend union sub-branch meetings due to timing and other family commitments. But when asked to offer alternatives, the answer is rarely one that suits all members and changing times can indeed become more confusing and unworkable for sub-branches. Perhaps however, the rigid way of holding meetings for union business is becoming outmoded and, though essential to some union work, other tasks can perhaps become more flexible and more open than they are.

Networks can be facilitated via email, via online chat rooms, phone hook-ups, or working groups can be convened in even smaller groups to tackle issues task by task.

As we've heard, women DO get involved with their union because of professional issues. If a union event can be useful to a woman's professional work, above and beyond the supportive and industrial arena, they are more likely to attend and from there become more exposed to the rest of the union's business. So organising more professional issues forums, training, publications etc can be a way to expose more women to their union's activities than a flyer in a pigeon hole.

Conversely, when the last thing needed is another meeting to attend, and all that is wanted is a drink and a 'relax', possibly a debrief, union social events can break down the stereotypes for many potential activists. Holding women's committees over dinner, or simply organising regular morning teas, weekend brunches, or even Friday evening drinks as a means to bring women together into a supportive and social network can be a powerful beginning – again particularly for those with little contact with colleagues throughout the working day.

**Getting to women where they are, in local, less formal, professional or social ways rather than imposing unnatural and confrontational networking environment on them is a sensible and necessary re-orientation of union's recruiting and organising methodology.**

### 3. **Increasing the involvement** (building union strength)

A lot has been said amongst Australian unions about the 'organising model' and about maximising political leverage of a (broadly) declining membership base, and hence attempting to attract workers back to their unions.

In the public education sector, the AEU and its affiliated bodies can boast membership density of around mid 80 to mid 90 percentiles in the schools sector, and roughly 30-40% on average in the TAFE division. This is vastly different to most other Australian unions, broken by Australian Workplace Agreements and the Howard Government's many Workplace Relations Act regressions – membership density on average around the country is more like 25%.

Due to the gendered nature of the Australian workforce, the education profession is dominated by women. Most AEU Branches and Associated Bodies have approximately 65-70% of women members. Yet 70% membership rarely translates into 70% of active members being women or women holding 70% of decision making positions. The potential strength in maximising the to date under-utilised section of the membership in the AEU would set us apart from so many other unions and provide a fantastic industrial opportunity for the profession, (as well as longevity for the union).

Sui-Linn White (Eric Pearson Study Grant 2004) reports the intense "reality check" needed in the way we assess the 'success' of our affirmative action approach for women. She reports:



*“Focus group and interview participants generally offered an analysis of the obstacles to leadership and representative positions encountered or observed by them over a period of time since they entered their profession and joined their union. Some unions reported that they had “no problems” with gender and participation because their meetings were attended by a majority of female members and/or they had a female president and/or the Officers/Staff were mostly female. This demonstrates that examining the statistical analyses of gender representation so often used in union self-evaluation can be simplistic and misleading.*

*When challenged about the realities of their decision-making forums, the analysis was quite different, and much more useful. Examining the realities involved a deeper questioning into:*

- *the types of leadership positions occupied by women (are they the positions with limited power or influence?)*
- *how they were achieved (appointed / elected/ short term/ long term),*
- *numbers of women seeking and getting the call on the floor (‘talk time’)*
- *how much time they speak for/ extensions required or granted, and*
- *the sustainability of women in those positions (medium to long term prognosis).*

*When the ‘realities’ were examined, participants from these unions realised that their affirmative action work needed greater priority.”*

The challenge however, is in continuing to advance the necessary strategies for women’s involvement in the union, and to maximise the membership without getting caught up in backlash debates and resentful, confronted members who may view an increase in women’s involvement as an attack on male comrades, or an outright takeover based on gender.

Outside critics of the union, including the Minister of Education, (at the time of writing) Brendan Nelson, already believe that teacher unions have monopolised the curriculum for the benefit of girls and that the feminist movement has gone ‘too far’ and will somehow feminise boys. Within the union, the backlash is not quite as abrupt, but the existence of women’s committees, women’s contact officers and the like do frequently face questioning and need to be presented to the membership in well explained and researched ways.

Again, Mclean offers a great insight into why women’s organising can be seen as such a threat amongst many men. He says:

*“Taken-for-granted masculine ways of viewing the world mean that collective critiques of men’s power are usually experienced in two ways.*

*Firstly, they are felt as personal attacks, directed at individuals, and secondly as assertions that ‘males are inherently bad and we are out to get you’...The power of masculine meaning systems ensures that men tend to hear even the most gentle criticism as an attack, and this is strongly reinforced by the mainstream media’s continued portrayal of feminism in cliched, confrontational terms.” (1997, p13)*

### Immense Possibilities

The following are just a few of the mechanisms unions are trialling internationally that the NSWTF Eric Pearson Study Grant reported in 2004:

- **Job sharing** in union employee positions was an important development and was discussed most commonly in the UK. Participants reported the benefit of enabling more women to apply and gain experience, being able to allocate the jobs to the most appropriate person, having an alternate/substitute and attracting two sets of ideas and creativity. These benefits were seen to



far outweigh any arguments against flexible arrangements such as the potential for duplication, confusion of responsibilities and the potential for people to exploit this. In the CSP in UK, one quarter of workplace reps are job sharing, and they all receive a minimum of five days training.

- **Local provision on activities** Reviewing the location of meetings was something that unions in Canada, US and Northern Ireland have undertaken, and this was seen as a positive step to making meetings less formal and intimidating, thereby facilitating participation. In one union, the relocation of some committee meetings to people's homes was a welcome alternative to meeting in halls or clubs.

Similarly, the location of most training courses was generally central, however there were some unions who used the 'train the trainer' model to take courses out into regions. A widely held view was that as well as being more accessible for women "the connectedness and relevance of the union is more clearly seen when training is delivered locally". (Northern Ireland)

Work colleagues and friendship support groups become union comrades to new members, an imperative to continuing union involvement/progression for many women. The active encouragement by union colleagues suggests others steps for new members, such as attending training, participating in forums, joining committees.

- \* *(What is interesting about this approach is that we know it works, because that is how informal male political/power networks have operated for decades – the maintenance of information flows, of mentoring, of confidence boosting, of access to opportunities all come down to who you know and encouragement you receive. When this operates on a formal level, as part of an organising, recruiting and empowerment strategy for women, the broad results are heartening.)*

- **Community Focus** As women often already have connections and community involvement prior to and alongside their union membership, the local mobilisation of women in such networks could potentially be a great resource for unions wanting to recruit and empower more women.

A UK union talked of how, "women have skills and experience often not recognised, such as listening to others, checking things out, and hesitate in putting themselves forward. They are more likely to look at developing strong networks. They also have bargaining skills they have implicitly developed in their involvement in the community and links with other organisations such as carnivals, fund raising, voluntary work, environmental groups and childcare."

Similarly the UK Trades Union Congress used the call for volunteers in community work like on hospital boards, local councils, school governance etc to promote women's involvement in broader public life as well as to promote the public face of the union and hence its appeal.

- **Active When You Can Be** Norwegian women acknowledge that its not always a good time to 'put on the union hat' – sometimes you are just too busy, or too tired, or wanting time to foster personal relationships, and this should not be considered as a black mark against your name as a unionist.

*Women Across Divides* is an activist network involving individuals and members from across unions and non-government organisations, funded by individuals in Norway. It is more of a network, than an organisation but it works to maximise people's preparedness to participate and is not heavily dependent on regular attendance at meetings held frequently. Rather, it is dependent on its participants attending whenever they can realistically manage.

*Women Across Divides* identified that one difficulty with this is that women often feel guilty about inconsistent participation and therefore sometimes choose not to participate at all.



The forums are about creating a time and place for women to meet and build alliances.

- **Generate or Evaporate**

The educational workforce, just as others are, is an ageing one. So too is the union membership base. If organisational change does not take place to build and strengthen union membership, women's participation will also dwindle, and in the face of the impending exodus from the profession, this would mean a significant step backward for every affirmative action initiative of the past and a repeat of history taking us back 30 years.

That is, if the next generation of potential women leaders choose not to take that path because organisations such as unions have not put into place appropriate strategies such as providing family friendly workplaces and encouraging healthy work-life balance, then organisations will miss out by having yet another male dominated generation of leaders.

Norway offers a proactive strategy for involving and empowering potential union members before they even step into the workplace. **Pedagogstudentene** (PS) is the student teacher body of the teachers' union Utdanningsforbundet in Norway. It is the voice of the future teachers and the Utdanning's recruitment 'machine'. Utdanningsforbundet have recently established an office in their building for the annually elected two PS leaders.

PS actively pursues and fosters media exposure; involvement in public debates on education and social justice issues; critique of curriculum documents; promoting teaching as a profession and pride in teaching and involvement in 'Solidarity Week' fund raising activities. It acts as a recruitment point, a professional voice and a union leadership training ground for future union strength and empowerment. ([www.pedagogstudentene.no](http://www.pedagogstudentene.no)).

## References

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